

Urban Village Case Studies



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Executive Summary

Seattle's Comprehensive Plan balances two different, but related, ideas. One is that the city will continue to grow, in numbers of both residents and employees. The second is that the city should manage this growth to help ensure that resources will be used in a way that will allow future generations to prosper.

The Comprehensive Plan's urban village strategy addresses both of these ideas. The urban village strategy directs Seattle's future growth primarily to the urban villages because these places already have the infrastructure, services and zoning in place to accommodate that development. Seattle's neighborhoods have developed plans for each of the urban villages.

After eight years with the urban village strategy and in advance of a ten-year update to the Comprehensive Plan, this report asks the following questions: Is the strategy working? How have goals been achieved or progress made thus far?

FIVE URBAN VILLAGES

In order to answer these questions a case study approach was used. This allowed a deeper study of five urban villages: 12th Avenue, Belltown, Greenwood-Phinney Ridge, Rainier Beach and the West Seattle Junction. These villages were chosen because they represent a variety of locations, sizes, and types of urban villages, current and historic land use, and extent of growth.

The results of the five case studies are encouraging. Urban villages are fulfilling their role defined in the Comprehensive Plan as the primary locations for growth in Seattle. Although their experiences with growth have been different, all five urban villages profiled in this report have experienced significant growth.

Population and Household Change 1990-2000

		Population			Households		
	Acres	1990	2000	Change	1990	2000	Change
All Urban Villages	9,350	146,960	175,240	19%	77,150	90,290	17%
12 th Avenue	160	2,410	3,520	46%	700	960	36%
Belltown	220	4,120	8,500	106%	3,220	5,870	82%
Greenwood-Phinney	94	2,020	2,310	14%	1,130	1,230	8%
Rainier Beach	250	2,670	3,360	26%	980	1,230	25%
W. Seattle Junction	226	2,890	3,490	21%	1,620	1,980	22%
Outside Villages	44,410	369,300	388,130	5%	159,560	168,210	5%

Belltown has seen dramatic growth, with its population doubling in 10 years. The neighborhood has changed from one of surface parking lots and low scale buildings to a neighborhood of high-rise apartment and condominium buildings with an active street life and lively pedestrian environment.

Rainier Beach's growth is less visible, but almost as dramatic. In the ten years between 1990 and 2000, the neighborhood's vacancy rate decreased from 22% of the housing stock to 3%, and its owner-occupancy rate grew to 27%, higher than the average for all urban villages. This growth within urban villages appears to be strengthening their communities and their business districts. It is also serving the Comprehensive Plan's

purpose by focusing residential growth in areas where services and transit are readily available.

As growth occurs, urban villages are seeing changes in their demographics. The households living within urban villages are generally more racially diverse, are more likely to live alone, are younger and are poorer, than the populations in the surrounding neighborhoods. The new housing units in urban villages tend to be in multifamily buildings and are attractive to smaller and younger households.

Seattle's Household Composition in 2000

	Inside Urban Villages		Outside Urban Villages	
	Number	% of Total	Number	% of Total
Households	90,291	100%	168,208	100%
with children	10,499	12%	40,284	24%
with seniors	14,126	15%	35,045	21%
Family Households	24,177	27%	89,223	53%
One-Person Households	50,545	56%	54,997	33%
Average Household Size	1.73		2.26	

NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGE AND PLANNING

The importance of neighborhood planning in maintaining urban villages as attractive places to live cannot be overstated. Residents and business owners in all neighborhoods used neighborhood planning to identify locally important issues related to growth and to begin to address them.

Among the early successes of the neighborhood plans are the streetscape improvements in the West Seattle Junction. These improvements would not have occurred if the commercial and residential communities and City government had not developed a partnership to implement the neighborhood plan recommendations. The Greenwood Park project, a long-time neighborhood priority was accelerated as a result of the neighborhood planning process and is currently under construction.

Neighborhood planning also contributed ideas for projects to three bonds and levies. These City-developed, voter-approved funding mechanisms address some of the infrastructure needs in urban villages. New parks are being developed across the city, especially in urban villages, as the result of the Pro-Parks levy. Three new community centers in urban villages, including one in Belltown, are being developed as a result of the Community Centers Levy. Libraries across the city are being renovated or replaced through the Libraries for All bond measure, including the libraries in Greenwood and Rainier Beach, two of the urban villages covered in this report. All of these levies and bonds grew from the work of neighborhoods to identify needs and lists of activities that could foster positive change in their communities.

However, even with the neighborhood plans, not all of the desired changes are occurring at the same rate in all urban villages. Belltown, West Seattle Junction, Greenwood-Phinney Ridge, and to a lesser extent 12th Avenue, have all seen increases in pedestrian activity in the commercial cores. Rainier Beach, on the other hand, has not seen an appreciable change in the quality of the pedestrian environment. With the removal of

small businesses along Rainier Avenue to make way for a large grocery store parking lot, the neighborhood may see a decrease in the number of pedestrians.

Among urban villages studied for this report, there are differences in the implementation of neighborhood plans. In spite of the impressive improvements to the West Seattle Junction's commercial core, the "Fauntleroy Gateway" has seen little change or attention and is likely to keep its existing automobile-oriented character for years to come.

Both Rainier Beach and the West Seattle Junction raise important questions about establishing urban villages in existing automobile-oriented neighborhoods. While most areas designated as urban villages were existing pedestrian-oriented business districts, a number of urban villages contain automobile-oriented areas that have been developed since the 1940s. It will take continued effort by the City and neighborhoods to develop strategies for guiding areas like Rainier Beach and the Fauntleroy Gateway toward the pedestrian and transit orientation desired for urban villages.

Similarly, increased traffic and parking demand in pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods present conflicts that cooperative efforts between neighborhoods and the City will need to address. Greenwood's struggle to retain a crosswalk near the center of its urban village is one example of the clash between cars and pedestrians within urban villages.

LESSONS LEARNED

While similar issues arise in more than one village, these case studies help illustrate that there can be several effective ways to tackle the same problem. This is because the physical circumstances vary from one place to another, and because people in different locations define problems in different ways. Local organizations can also provide unique opportunities for solving particular problems. Just as there is no such thing as a "typical" neighborhood, there is no single formula for enabling neighborhoods to grow comfortably. Instead, through neighborhood planning, each neighborhood has found what would work best for its residents and its identity.

Finally, the number of people engaged in neighborhood planning and plan stewardship has created a remarkable legacy of citizen participation. People in every urban village we studied said (usually before asked) that involvement and activism are still high today because of the neighborhood planning process that ended three years ago. They believe that their communities are better places because of that activism. In times of competing priorities and tight City budgets, this kind of activism and vigilance may be even more necessary to ensure continued funding and attention for improvements as the urban villages accept more growth.